

Interdisciplinarity in Irish Music Pedagogy

Sean Williams

Abstract

This article examines one aspect of pedagogy – interdisciplinarity – in connection with learning Irish tunes and songs at the university level. This approach is not categorically superior to any other method, but it may well be worth trying in some form, particularly for those who live and teach outside of Ireland. It includes descriptions of situating musical material in the context of sections on Irish history, politics, literature, and other fields. While few courses in Irish music include the type of full-time work that this programme requires, I include case studies, suggestions on (and examples of) assignments, and tips on how to incorporate interdisciplinary work in performance classes. Finally, I argue that interdisciplinarity has its benefits for those who teach Irish music *in Ireland*, particularly as Irish student lives become increasingly cosmopolitan and saturated in international media.

Key words: pedagogy, interdisciplinarity, Irish language, songs, tunes

Introduction

Irish music pedagogies run the gamut from painstaking phrase-by-phrase learning with a teacher to absorption by ear before ever picking up an instrument, and from ‘abc’ notation or sheet music to lessons online to poring over piles of tunebooks (or songbooks) in the privacy of one’s own home. For some students of Irish music, learning to play tunes is simply an aspect of learning to play a musical instrument, with tunes increasing in difficulty as one’s instrumental facility increases. For those who study songs, listening to living singers and their recordings can be an essential method, while others sight-read out of songbooks. This article examines one aspect of pedagogy – interdisciplinarity – in connection with learning Irish tunes and songs at the university level. This approach is not categorically superior to any other method, but it may well be worth trying in some form, particularly for those of us who live and teach outside of Ireland. Finally, I will argue that interdisciplinarity has its benefits for those who teach Irish music *in Ireland*, particularly as Irish student lives become increasingly cosmopolitan and saturated in international media.

The philosopher Seneca believed that “education should produce citizens who could call their minds their own through study of the subjects and methods best suited for enlightened decision-making. That idea and the ancient Greek values of synthesis and developing the ‘whole person’ became part of the legacy of integrative values in humanities, liberal education, general education, and many programs of interdisciplinary studies” (Rhoten et al 2000, web source). The integrative nature of interdisciplinary teaching and learning is not new. What *is* new is that it has had to undergo a process of revitalisation and legitimising in 21st century education to be taken seriously again.

I teach at The Evergreen State College in Washington State, 7,000 kilometers from Ireland. In seven different iterations, every three years since 1994, I have taught Irish music within an interdisciplinary, year-long, full-time Irish Studies programme titled “Ireland in History and Memory” that includes two months of study abroad experience in Ireland. Because the institute where I work privileges interdisciplinarity as opposed to discipline-specific teaching, my work with Irish music necessarily appears interwoven with other disciplines as part of our Irish Studies work rather than as an isolated performance course. Irish music appears within that programme in the learning of songs

in Irish and English, and two hours weekly of tune playing across twenty weeks.ⁱ By receiving and performing Irish songs and tunes within the context of Irish Studies, students have the opportunity to contextualise these items in ways that leaning exclusively on the notes, rhythms, and styles would not provide. It also allows students without a music focus (the majority, in fact) to weave music into their larger understanding of Irish culture. When our academic structure is built on a disciplinary approach, that approach necessarily informs the way we understand our subject material. However, ethnomusicology is inherently interdisciplinary, which means what we do and how we teach may directly clash with not only academic structure, but academic epistemologies regarding education.

“Disciplines provide the rationale for the departmental structure of U.S. colleges and universities and strongly influence faculty appointments; hiring, promotion, and tenure practices; teaching assignments; student recruitment and enrollment, and even accounting practices. (. . .) Moreover, despite increases in interdisciplinary activity in postsecondary education, disciplinary frameworks still organise most faculty members’ understandings and interpretations of information and experience” (Lattuca 2001: 1).

Using an interdisciplinary approach with Irish music connects the students to the tunes and songs along with other aspects of Irish culture within the framework of history, including such diverse topics as politics, class, theatre, spiritual practices, emigration, literature, alcohol, gender, dance, food, natural history, film, race, poetry, the Irish diaspora, family dynamics, colonialism, archaeology, identities, vaudeville and minstrelsy, language, urban/rural divisions, labour, the Travelers, modernisation, etc. Recognising the Gaelic League’s connection to the Church, and understanding that building a nation required the censure of popular (French-based) quadrille dancing in favour of the celebrated image of the prepubescent step-dancing girl is part of this work. Interdisciplinarity means physically standing in front of the statue of CúChulainn at the GPO one April evening and recognising not only himself but Pádraig Pearse *and* Jesus Christ in that statue, while the Irish person walking past pauses, sings the chorus of “Óró, Sé do Bheatha ‘Bhaile”, then crosses himself, mutters “Tiocfaidh ár lá”, and leaves.ⁱⁱ Bringing depth and understanding to that experience is the point of interdisciplinarity.

A typical 16-hour week in this particular context for Irish music would begin with a two-hour lecture about an aspect of Irish history, then a two-hour seminar in which students carry most of the discussion. In preparation for that seminar, the students will have read several hundred pages of texts of various kinds (non-fiction, creative non-fiction, and fiction). The next day might begin with a film (sometimes an Irish- or American-made documentary, sometimes a feature film) with time for discussion, followed by a hands-on workshop. The third day would include a two-hour tune-learning session, followed by a reader’s theatre performance of a relevant play. The fourth day begins with a lecture on a conceptual theme (liminality, ideals of authenticity, land and language, shame vs. guilt, etc.) and concludes with an integrative seminar in which faculty and students sum up the week’s work together. Note that in the context of a week, every day includes singing in Irish and English (depending on the subject matter), and every day includes instruction in the Irish language. After twenty weeks of working in roughly chronological order from pre-Celtic Ireland to the present, the students leave for Ireland in the spring to put theory into practice.

Teaching Irish Tunes and Songs

Few students have the opportunity to learn to play an instrument prior to enrolling in Irish Studies, so I teach them various instruments (usually pennywhistle and fiddle, but also DADGAD guitar, mandolin, and for those who request it, bodhrán) during our class meetings. I use both learning by ear and the use of sheet music for those who need it; I have found that even those who can't read music want to at least look at the sheet music in the hope that the notes will become clear over time. After a few weeks I suggest that the sheet music be put away.ⁱⁱⁱ Beginning-level tunes include the song “Did the Rum Do” (Figure 1), which I learned during the several years that I spent studying with the sean-nós singer Joe Heaney. I teach it to them to simultaneously give them skills in liltting and get a tune into their heads before they touch their instruments. Once they are very comfortable with the vocabulary of liltting, they can apply that vocabulary to many other tunes in an unselfconscious way.

Did the rum do, did the rum do, did the rum do, Dad - dy? Did the rum do, did the rum do,
7 did the rum do, Dad - dy? Did the rum do, did the rum do, dee dye dee did-dle dee doo-dle dum,
13 did the rum do, did the rum do, did the rum do, me daugh- ters? Did-dle-ee eye-dle-ee ar - ee
19 dye dee did-dle-dee doo-dle dum, did-dle ee eye-dle ee ar - ee, did-dle-ee-eye-dle ee ar - um.

Figure 1: “Did the Rum Do?”

While “Did the Rum Do?” has a specific vocabulary dominated by words such as “diddle” and its variants, other tunes lend themselves easily to liltting once the process has been started with this first one. The fact that the song/tune is embedded in a story further introduces students to the concept of the context of a musical item.^{iv} Because liltting a tune is an important bridge between tunes and songs, it serves the purpose of engaging their voices without making them worry about the quality of their singing. In fact, before they enroll in this programme, most American students are very comfortable sounding out the melodies of songs in pop and rock. Liltting Irish tunes is simply an extension of a skill they already possess (but don't know they possess), and it connects them to the large repertoire of dance tunes in Irish instrumental music in a fluid way.

Other tunes that serve as introductory materials for the students include “Wind That Shakes the Barley”, “Máire Dhall”, “O’Keeffe’s Slide”, “Boys of Malin”, “Off to California”, “Seán Ryan’s Polka”, “South Wind”, “Proinsias Ó Maonaigh’s Mazurka”, and “Drowsy Maggie”. They introduce students to some of the different dance forms and standard keys of the tunes, and introduce the idea of more regional-specific tune forms (slides, polkas, barndances, mazurkas) beyond the overwhelmingly popular jigs and reels.

In teaching the songs, I notate one verse (and the refrain, if there is one), then supply the lyrics for the remainder of the song. In the song “Is Trua Nach Bhfuil Mé in Éirinn” (Figure 2), students can at least get a sense of which syllable belongs to which note in the first verse. Because the songs are not published anywhere, I can alter them, make corrections, and update as I learn more in each iteration. I have over a hundred Irish-language songs notated this way, from which I can draw as I change the focus of my interdisciplinary class to highlight a particular aspect of Irish culture.

Is tru-a nach_bhfuil mé'n Éir-inn san áit ar tóg-adh mé'i dtús mo shaoil, ná faoi bhru-ach na Bin-ne

6 Mói-re ná'agan Éir-ne le-na taobh; Sin an áit a bhfaighinn t'aos óg ann thóg-fadh'an brón seo s'an tuir-se

12 díom, s'dá mbeinn bliain eile arís ní b'óige go mbeinn ag gabháil leo - fa a - rís.

Figure 2: The first verse of “Is Trua Nach Bhfuil Mé in Éirinn”.

These students have never sung in Irish before, so below the notated verse I use a tripartite system of the Irish language (bold, italicised), fake phonetics in brackets, and an English translation for each line, as in this first verse:

Is trua nach bhfuil mé in Éirinn, san áit ar tógadh mé i dtús mo shaoil
[stroo-ah nah will meyn yer-rin, sunn atch air toe-goo meh doos mo he-ull]
It is a pity that I am not in Ireland, in the place where I began my life

Ná faoi bhruach na Binne Móire, ná ag an Éirne lena taobh;
[nuh fwee vroo-akh nah bin-ya moy-ra, nag unn air-nya leh-na tee-oo]
Nor under the bank of the Binne Móire river, nor at the Éirne by its side;

Sin an áit a bhfaighinn t-aos óg ann, a thógfadh an brón seo is an tuirse díom
[shin un atch ah ween tees oge unn, hoe-kunn brone sho sun ter-sha djee-um]
That is the place of the young people, that would lift the sorrow and tiredness from me

Is dá mbeinn bliain eile arís ní b'óige, go mbeinn ag gabháil leofa arís.
[sduh meyn blee-un yell-ya-reesh nee boy-gya, go meyn egg gowl lyo-fuh a-reesh.]
And if I were a year younger, I would be going back with you.

In addition to singing the songs myself, with the caveat that I am not a native Irish speaker, I play several different versions of the song so the students hear the variations inherent in a living tradition, and have a better sense of pronunciation than I can offer.^v Using regionally based songs allows the students to associate specific songs and styles with specific areas, and to enhance their pronunciation so that it is more regionally correct. In addition, the use of songs that cover a number of regions within Ireland allows students to understand the broader relevance and migration patterns that occur with those songs.^{vi}

By the end of the six months prior to visiting Ireland, they can usually play two dozen tunes and sing about thirty or forty songs in Irish and English, depending on that particular year. They learn more songs and tunes during their visit to Ireland, of course, but they have a foundation before they leave home. In teaching songs, I represent the Munster/Connacht/Ulster spectrum of Irish-language songs and offer a variety of older and newer songs in English... again, discussing the context of where they might be sung. Furthermore, the songs run the gamut from love songs, laments, lullabies, aisling songs, dialogue songs, comic songs, and many others. I sing the first verse several times until they start humming along, and I encourage them to jump in when they're able and to "hydroplane" through the song, hitting as many of the correct notes as possible. Once they have learned a song, we repeat it in the following weeks and months so that they do not forget it. Each student is encouraged to learn a party piece, and understands the importance of participation by invitation.

The Irish Language and Song

In addition to teaching the full-time, year-long programme that includes tunes as well as songs, I also teach a summer evening class ("Irish Language and Song") to students who work during the day. For five weeks, eight hours each week in two four-hour blocks, I teach them the basics of the language (conversation and grammar) and engage them in Irish-language songs that illustrate the grammatical principles that were taught earlier in the evening. Teaching the Irish-language chorus of "An Crúiscín Lán" (Figure 3) on the very first day of class, for example, illustrates the possessive pronouns *mo* and *do* and the lenition of the nouns that follow. Meanwhile, the song itself is not just a paean to alcohol, but an effective example of a macaronic song (English-language verses, Irish-language chorus) and an illustration of emphasis on liminal elements in Irish society. For students whose introduction to the language is all of two hours old, the repetition in the chorus corrects their pronunciation almost immediately, softens the awkward roughness of the lenited c in *chroí* and *chrúiscín*, and comfortably leads them right through their initial phrases beyond introductions and "how are you" and "I am fine; and yourself?" in Irish.

Let the far-mer praise his ground, and the hunts-man praise his hound, the shep- herd his sweet shad- y
7
grove; I'm more blest than they, spend each hap-py night and day with my smi-ling lit-tle crúis- cín-
15
lán, lán, lán, with my smi-ling lit-tle crúis- cín- lán, lán, lán. Grá mo chroí, mo
23
chrúis- cín, sláin-te geal mo mhuir- nín, grá mo chroí mo chrúis- cín- lán, lán, lán; grá
30
mo chroí mo chrúis- cín, sláin-te geal mo mhuir- nín, is cum-a liom do chúil- in- duibh no bán.

Figure 3: The first verse and chorus of "An Crúiscín Lán".

“An Raibh Tú ar an gCarraig?” is one more example of using a song to indicate a crucial grammatical issue. By the time the students have developed their understanding of irregular verbs beyond *tá*, songs are the perfect illustration of the use of irregular past tense verbs. Because irregular verbs in language are often the oldest verbs, they are the ones that have evolved the most over time. Such irregular verbs also tend to be associated with the body: sight, hearing, speech, moving, and being. While this song is sometimes derided among Irish speakers as “nothing but a school song”, it serves multiple purposes in teaching and learning. It represents a conversation, it opens up a classroom discussion on the Penal Laws and the existence of Mass Rocks, and it includes extensive vocal ornamentation usually associated with the Connemara Gaeltacht.^{vii} In addition, it privileges the use of metaphor – an important value in Irish conversation – rather than the type of direct speech one would encounter in a much more straightforward Irish history book. By using the irregular verb *feic* in two iterations (*an bhfaca tú* and *chonaic mé*), students hear those verbs in the context of how they are sung, not just how they appear in an Irish-language textbook.^{viii}

*An raibh tú ar an gcarraig
 Nó an bhfaca tú féin mo ghrá?
 Nó an bhfaca tú gile 's finne
 Agus scéimh na mná?
 Nó an bhfaca tú an t-ubhal
 Ba deise is ba ghlaise bláth?
 Nó an bhfaca tú mo Valentine
 Nó an bhfuil sí dhá claoi mar táid a rá?*

*Ó bhí mé ar an gcarraig
 Agus chonaic mé féin do ghrá
 Agus chonaic mé gile 's finne
 Agus scéimh na mná
 Agus chonaic mé an t-ubhal
 Ba deise is ba ghlaise bláth
 Agus chonaic mé mo Valentine
 Is tá sí dhá claoi mar táid a rá.*

The summer class, which earns four credit hours, leaves the students with not only a dozen or more songs in Irish,^{ix} but also with basic conversational and reading skills along with important contextual information. It is rather like a very compact version of the year-long programme, but with complete emphasis on the Irish language and far less on history (or memory).

Case Studies: The Famine and The Troubles

What follows are two separate approaches to different subjects in the Irish Studies programme at The Evergreen State College; in the weeks dedicated to these events, I situate tunes and/or songs in order to contextualise the music in ways that will connect them in students' minds. The subjects are the Famine and the Troubles. Any Irish student who has family members born and raised in Ireland will have a set of received stories from his or her family about each of those topics. In addition, between the requirements of the Leaving Cert, the tendency to practically trip over an essential place in Irish history simply by going for a drive (or, if one is in Dublin, a walk downtown), and

the vivid, engaged nature of the Irish popular imagination about matters historical, Irish history is alive in people's minds in Ireland in ways that it is not in the United States.^x Please note that most approaches to history are compromised by their inability to reproduce everyone's history to the satisfaction of all. The fact that they are so compromised means that we are essentially free to put together a multifaceted window through which our students can explore histories and perspectives that could not appear in a single textbook.

The disciplinary grounding (a core principle of interdisciplinary work) that is essential to understanding Irish traditional music cannot be lost in approaching an important historical period in Ireland. Throughout the teaching of each era, students are still learning songs and tunes, studying the Irish language, and making demonstrable progress through participation and – in the case of the language – exams. However, the songs and tunes are directed toward a connection with specific points in Irish history rather than just a catalog of someone's party pieces or session favorites.

The Famine

In most of North America, the Famine is not only completely misunderstood, but it has none of the contested complexity attached to it that characterises teaching and learning about it in Ireland (see Kinealy 1995, for example). Without detailing the potential failures of the American educational system, let me just indicate here that American history textbooks tend to relegate the Famine to a one-note phenomenon of agricultural failure. In teaching about the Famine, then, I combine songs, poems, eyewitness accounts, texts, films, visual art, and lectures. I show the entire four hours of the BBC Ulster production of *The Hanging Gale*,^{xi} complete with lengthy classroom discussion, and they read (among other resources) the first half of Thomas Gallagher's *Paddy's Lament* because of its extensive use of eyewitness accounts. Beyond those, I post a special page on the class website that includes approximately a hundred eyewitness accounts from as many sides of the tragedy as I can find.

Among the dozen poems that the students study to explore the Famine, I include John Hewitt's "The Scar" ("Yet in that woman's death I found my nation"), Seamus Heaney's "At a Potato Digging" ("Live skulls, blind eyes"), and Eavan Boland's "The Famine Road" ("What is your body now if not a famine road?"). While it is easy to argue that songs are merely sung poetry, and that the use of song *without* poetry might well do just as good of a job, I would argue that presenting the undeniably wrenching images of present-day Famine poetry sets the students up well to explore imagery of the era as it appears in song.

The Connemara song "Johnny Seoighe" is regionally specific, speaks directly to issues of shaming, naming names, the workhouse, the conditions, and the two-edged sword of praise singing. It is a very challenging song to sing, and not only because of its range of nearly two octaves. It illustrates aspects of the Famine that a mere lecture would not accomplish, and its use in class exposes students to specific ways of expressing profound emotion during a particular period of Irish history.

*Agus lá arna mhárach a fuair mé an páipéar
'S nach mé a bhí sásta, 's mé a goil chun síúil
Ach 's ní bhfuair mé freagra ar bith an lá sin
Ach mo bhean 's mo pháistí, is iad amuigh faoin drúcht.*

*Tá mé bruite, dóite, sciúrtha, feannta,
Liobraithe, gearrtha le neart an tsiúil
Is a Mhister Joyce tá an workhouse lán
Is ní ghlacfar ann aon fhear níos mó.*

And on the next day I got the piece of paper
And I wasn't happy, me going on my way
But I got no answer at all that day
But my wife and my children left out under the dew.
I am tired, bitter, lashed, frozen
Upset and lacerated with the force of the walking
And Mister Joyce, the workhouse is full
And they won't accept one more man.

Because each week includes one song in Irish and one in English, I use "The Fields of Athenry". Obviously, the song does *not* date back to the middle of the 19th century; however, it shows up so frequently onstage and in the popular imagination that not to include it would be to do a disservice to contemporary linkages of Irish identity and the Famine. When Ireland lost to Spain on June 14 in the 2012 Euro Cup in Gdansk, Poland, the Irish fans who had gathered celebrated their defeat by singing, over and over, the chorus of "The Fields of Athenry":

Low lie the fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuOYYHLZEQk>

Because my students become so attuned to some of the subtleties of reactions to trauma and the connections between written histories, received histories, and memory, they understand the ways in which singing "The Fields of Athenry" is a complex reaction to a fraught soccer match.

Finally, in response to all that they have learned, my students have to create a work of visual art to turn in at the end of Famine Week. It can be in two or three dimensions, but they have to be able to articulate for their colleagues in the classroom exactly what they are trying to convey. Some students are exceptionally good artists, and for them, this exercise is crucial to their expression of their understanding of the Famine (Figure 4). In the case of this particular piece of art, the student (Caroline Willard) explored the idea of history being glossed over and obscured through the use of the bog as metaphor. Her rendition of a post-Famine stone cottage with the evidence of death – the barren trees – and the creeping bog covering up the evidence of the Famine enabled her to speak in ways that her sometimes-minimal seminar participation would not have revealed.



Figure 4: A post-Famine cottage being taken over by the bog (student Caroline Willard – used with permission).

The Troubles

If there were ever a subject in Irish Studies that was more challenging to present, I cannot envision it. Anyone trying to work their students through the conflict, regardless of what they are trying to represent, has to confront dozens of “sides” (ideas, experiences, opinions). Perhaps most importantly, there is *no possibility of success* as far as I have been able to understand, because “success” is defined in so many different ways. I change my presentation of the subject every time, but I retain its interdisciplinarity because only that way can more perspectives be included. To begin with, the students spend two weeks on the book *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (David McKittrick and David McVea). In the past I have used *Lost Lives* (David McKittrick and others), *Living with War: a Belfast Year* (Sally Belfrage), and *Trinity* (Leon Uris) because the latter was read and discussed by prisoners in the H-Blocks. Using *Making Sense of the Troubles* has allowed the students to start the process of understanding with a relatively balanced sense of what happened without bogging them down in name-calling in either direction.

It is the norm that half my students are Protestants (running the gamut from devout to in-name-only), and half are Catholics (also devout to in-name-only). While it is easy to agree on the Famine and on what happened in Irish America, the Troubles lead to heated in-class discussions, with students trying initially to frame it as an exclusively religious conflict rather than a conflict about power and resources, often written through the lens of religious difference. My job, then, is to complicate every aspect of the conflict without losing any of the students in the process. To that end, I have to work with poetry, songs, plays, tunes, films, lecture materials, and discussion topics that lead to more light than heat.

Depending on the year, I draw from films such as *Some Mother's Son*, *In the Name of the Father*, *The Boxer*, *Cal*, *The Crying Game*, *Bloody Sunday* and others. I am painfully aware of the very low representation of women in representations of the Troubles (hence my occasional use of *Living with War* by Sally Belfrage), and I use that disproportion as a springboard for discussion on women's roles in conflicts in the North and elsewhere. In the article "The Politics of Defining 'Armed Conflict' in Northern Ireland", authors Ann Marie Gray and Elizabeth Law point out that "Mechanisms set up to deal with the legacy of the conflict, such as Healing Through Remembering and the Consultative Group on the Past, continue to be composed mainly of men with no recognition that women should be equally represented" (Gray and Law 2014: web source).

Part of the assignment for this section of the programme requires that students produce a piece of art in response to the Troubles. As is the case with the Famine, expressing oneself in a two-dimensional way allows students to give "voice", in a way, to the unspeakable. In presenting and discussing their art, students explain what they are trying to represent (for example, the way death has touched every side of the conflict) in ways that their peers (and I) can understand. They do not have to write about it, just as they do not have to write about the Famine, but they have to express some aspect of their understanding of it.

The plays *Freedom of the City* (Brian Friel) and *Quietly* (Owen McCafferty) offer rich territory for complex understanding and discussion in a (mostly) post-conflict situation. The entire block on the Troubles includes about a dozen poems, such as Heaney's "Casualty" and "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing", Eavan Boland's "The War Horse" and "Child of Our Time", Ciaran Carson's "Belfast Confetti", Michael Longley's "Ceasefire", and Padraic Fiacc's "Enemy Encounter". Kate Newmann (born in Co. Down) has led poetry-writing workshops with children affected by the Troubles; her publication of children's poetry from those workshops, *I Am*, is a rich resource for understanding the impact of acts of public (and private) violence on the next generation. Again, the materials change from year to year.

Few things are more cringe-worthy than the image of idealistic Yanks in Ireland, loudly singing rebel songs with pints in hand. The one song I ask them all to learn is Tommy Sands' "There Were Roses", but I usually play (and discuss) a selection of others, including "O'Hara, Hughes, McCreesh and Sands" (Mick Moloney), "Four Green Fields" (Tommy Makem), "Peter Pan and Me" (Mickey McConnell), "The Sash My Father Wore", "Sunday, Bloody Sunday", "Men Behind the Wire", "The Town I Loved So Well" (Phil Coulter), "The Auld Orange Flute", and "The H-Block Song (Francie Brolly)". Avoiding sectarian affiliation among the students is very challenging, at least partly because the students have spent much of the previous six months understanding Irish history from a largely Catholic orientation. Discussing Blood and Thunder bands and watching the documentary *Petrol Bombs and Peace: Welcome to Belfast*,^{xii} in which

Catholic journalist Alys Harte follows a Loyalist band in the days leading up to and including the 2013 marching season, helps students to complicate some of their ideas.

One year we were very fortunate to welcome Laurence McKeown to talk to us in the States. McKeown, one of the 1981 hunger strikers and former member of the Provisional IRA, is now a playwright, screenwriter, and author, having earned his Ph.D. at Queen's University Belfast. Speaking directly with someone is a radically different experience from hearing a lecture, so my students were dramatically more engaged when they visited Derry, six weeks later.^{xiii} Indeed, by visiting the Guild Hall, touring the walls with someone born and raised there, visiting the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin, and going through the Derry City Museum, students are better able to put theory into practice and imagination into reality. We have also visited Omagh and Claudy, depending on the year. For the most part, such visits mark the first time that students have been physically present in a location marked by conflict.

Building Assignments

Songs are incorporated into one of the programme's main assignments: to write an "integrative essay". This approach requires the selection of a theme, such as gender, family, death, love, power, class, truth-telling, sin, history vs. memory, spirituality, hospitality, urban vs. rural, emigration, sexuality, humor, or some other important lens. Then each student must write an essay examining a particular period in Irish history through that lens and, most importantly, refer to at least one song, one poem, one play, one film, one text, one class discussion, and one lecture as part of his or her essay. That way the student has to integrate song lyrics into the essay and treat that set of lyrics as an important point of reference. On a larger scale, this exercise requires students to take non-print traditions (songs, poems, plays, films, and lectures) just as seriously as literary ones.^{xiv} While all the students struggle at first to make these integrative essays work, they recognise the value of drawing from multiple fields and sources to explore a particular issue.

The luxury of working with the students for a full year allows me to require four interdisciplinary essays from them: on Ireland prior to 1300 CE (5-8 pages), on the English conquest and Famine (5-8 pages), on Irish America (8-10 pages), and – at the very end of the school year – on the theory and practice of Irish Studies (20-30 pages). For the first three essays I give them a "cheat sheet" so that they will remember which poems, films, texts, and other sources they have been exposed to. The following list is from the Irish America segment of the programme:

Lectures: Irish and American Music

The "Real" Irish and the Scotch Irish

The Making of a Cracker

Irish-American Minstrelsy

The Irish and the American Civil War

Irish- and African-American musical exchanges

Irish-American Labor Issues

Making the Irish "Safe" for America through popular songs and films

Plays: Philadelphia, Here I Come! (Brian Friel)

Poetry: Love in the Western World (Kathy Callaway)

The Emigrant (Richard Tillinghast)
For My Irish Grandfather (Joseph Awad)
The Emigrant Irish (Eavan Boland)
Going Back (Eithne McKiernan)
Why My Grandmother Could Never Escape Ireland (Richard Broderick)
Traces (Mark Vinz)
Leavetaking (Greg Delanty)
Memories (A.D. Winans)

Films: *The Field*
Sing the Dark Away
Songcatcher
The Molly Maguires
Selections: *Gone With the Wind* (opening scene between Scarlett and her Irish father and “I’ll Never Be Hungry Again” scene), *Going My Way* (Bing Crosby, “Substitute Right Fielder” scene), *On the Waterfront* (activist priest scene – Father Barry), *I Love Lucy* (chocolate factory “Bridget”), *Singin’ in the Rain* (opening scene: speaking lace curtain Irish with clips of shanty Irish in the background, “Make ‘Em Laugh”, and the “Moses Supposes” scene)
The Last Hurrah
Out of Ireland

Songs: Children’s songs: The Herring Song, I Love My Own Farm Too, etc.
Kilkelly, Ireland
Lord Thomas and Fair Ellender (western Kentucky version)
The Green Fields of America
Paddy’s Lament
Hard Times Come Again No More
Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy’s Chowder?
When Irish Eyes Are Smiling
No Irish Need Apply
Paddy Works on the Railway
Muldoon, the Solid Man

Texts: *Angela’s Ashes* (Frank McCourt)
Focus: Irish Traditional Music, chapter 5 (Sean Williams)
Banished Children of Eve (Peter Quinn)
Irish America: Coming Into Clover (Maureen Dezell)

Developing the end-of-the-year essay is utterly daunting for the students, and not only because of its sheer length. While producing an essay of between twenty and thirty pages is more than any of them have ever been asked to do, it is the content that concerns them more than anything else. The assignment is to take the theory of Irish Studies (everything they have learned in the six months at home) and apply that to the practice of living in Ireland for a couple of months in the spring. As is the case with all significant writing, though, the task is made manageable (not necessarily easier, given the enormity of detail possible) by breaking down the essay into shorter pieces. Each student is instructed to write a three-to-five page essay on a series of connected subjects, linking what they knew before they traveled to Ireland with what they experienced or witnessed during their visit.

As an example, in one section a student might discuss issues of hospitality in *The Táin* (the way Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad dressed each other's wounds at night, or Medb's "friendly thighs"). Continuing with examples of hospitality in Irish (and Irish-American) history, including the student's own family, the essay could include the songs "Here's a Health to the Company" and "Óró, Sé do Bheatha 'Bhaile", issues of immigration (drawing from Seán Lucy's "The New Invasions"), the hunger strikers of 1981 and their refusal of Margaret Thatcher's "hospitality", the tune "Jenny's Welcome to Charlie", (or "Carolan's Welcome") and their own experience of being invited to sing a party piece at a pub, or arriving at a B&B in Ireland and being presented with lively conversation and more sandwiches than any mortal being could possibly consume.

By connecting that short essay with five or six others on related topics, each student uses an approach that grounds their experiences in Ireland (different for each student) with what they learned at home (the same for each student). A logical next subject for the student might be women in Ireland and Irish America (given their importance in providing hospitality), or food in Irish and Irish-American culture (given the importance of food and drink in acts of hospitality). From food (which would logically include a discussion of the Famine), one could go on to alcohol in Ireland and Irish America. Each larger subject follows logically to the next in the ideal essay.

Depending on the students, the songs I teach, and the year, sometimes I require them to select one quoted section of a song (or all, in a given assignment)^{xv} and discuss it in a short essay, as follows:

Discuss these quotations from songs in English and Irish, naming the context (historical, political, or social) and what each one tells you about Irish or Irish-American culture during a particular era:

1. "She would eat meat on Friday and Saturday".
2. "Is a Mhister Joyce, tá an workhouse lán".
3. "And it's so good to hear that Michael's returning, with money he's sure to buy land; for the crop has been poor and the people are selling at any price that they can".
4. "Tá Gráinne Mhaol ag teacht thar sáile, óglaigh armtha léi mar gharda; gaeil iad féin 's ní Gaill ná Spáinnigh; 's cuirfidh siad ruaig ar Ghallaibh".
5. "So come with me and I will treat you decent, I'll sit you down and I will fill your can; and along the street all the friends I meet say 'There goes Muldoon, he's a solid man".
6. Is tuirseach is is brónach a chaithimse an Domhnach, mo hata i mo dhorn is mé ag osnaíl go trom; is mé ag amharc ar no bóithre a mbíonn mo ghrása ag gabháil ann, is anois ag fear eile pósta agus gan í bheith liom".
7. "When we got to Yankee land, they put guns into our hands, saying 'Paddy, you must go and fight for Lincoln".
8. "A bhuinneáin bhuí, mo thrua thú sínte, tá do chnámha reoite faoi bhun na dtom; tá do ghob is do scórnach ar dhath an óir bhuí, is do bhéilín ró-dheas 'na leaca lom".
9. "Well, fear it filled the countryside, there was fear in every home, when the car of death came prowling round the lonely Ryan Road; a Catholic would be killed tonight to even up the score, oh Christ, it's young O'Malley that they've taken from the door".

10. “Nach mise féin an fear gan chéill, a d’fhág mo chíos i mo scornaigh? D’fhág mé léan orm féin, is d’fhág mé séan ar dhaoine eile”.

In each case, the student’s ability to write about a quotation from a collection of song lyrics enables the interdisciplinarity grasp of the writer to be revealed and assessed. In addition, it is much more likely that students who can express themselves effectively about the content of a song won’t simply be mouthing a badly phoneticized version of a song to which they have no connection other than the fact that they think the tune is “cool”.

The Value and Applicability of Interdisciplinarity

It is daunting to shape a full school year (or a single semester or quarter) around an interdisciplinary approach such as this one. Some things work, and are continued in the next iteration, while elements that fall flat are dropped and replaced with new ideas. Because my degrees are in ethnomusicology rather than Irish Studies (though I had begun my parallel journey in Irish Studies by the late 1970s), I have relied on a broad array of information to fill in my own missing pieces, including many visits to Ireland and a continuous perusal of new works, conversations, and resources. For music departments that favour a “just the notes and rhythms” approach, however, some persuasion may well be in order. While at its most basic level, interdisciplinarity is about the interaction between two or more disciplines, when considering ethnomusicology it is clear that interdisciplinarity is central to what we do. In embarking on a fieldwork experience, any prepared ethnomusicologist has already explored the field site’s histories, political system(s), religion(s), language(s), and music(s). He or she will have watched films, eaten food from the region, and (probably) learned something about dance. Those are all normal activities for ethnomusicologists, and we do not take that preparation lightly. However, it is the transference of that skill set to our students, who lack our advantages, that challenges standard practices of assessment.

In their white paper from 2000 (“Interdisciplinary Education at Liberal Arts Institutions”), Diana Rhoten and others examined the results of a survey of over one hundred undergraduate liberal arts institutions with the aim of discerning the ways in which institutes structure and support interdisciplinary learning. Important student outcomes include the development of critical thinking skills, problem solving, and analytical skills along with disciplinary depth. An Irish music pedagogy that focuses on correct answers – such as a listening quiz to determine whether a tune is a jig or a hornpipe – is easy to assess. Measuring other skills, such as the ability to think critically and creatively, would require different means of assessment.

In addition to assessment of actual course content retention, it is worth wondering whether the skills one develops through interdisciplinary thinking are applicable outside of Irish music specifically, or ethnomusicology generally. In other words, when presented with a problem in Irish traditional music, could a student apply those problem-solving skills to a radically different situation?

“Would one assume that [a] student who majored in urban studies would also be able to excel in a project that focused on another interdisciplinary topic area such as the AIDS crisis; would one expect the student who studied ethnomusicology to be better equipped than her disciplinary counterparts to complete the task in urban renewal?” (Rhoten et al 2000: web source).

Because the focus of interdisciplinary education is one of asking good questions, it *is* possible that someone trained in ethnomusicology could ask the right questions and solve problems outside of academia.

In her book on interdisciplinarity titled *Creating Interdisciplinarity*, Lisa Lattuca specifies multiple types of interdisciplinarity on a spectrum from primarily disciplinary but drawing on other disciplines to “conceptual interdisciplinarity”, which draws from a variety of perspectives and, in doing so, “emphasises the *synthesis* of knowledge” (Lattuca 2001: 11). I would argue that in an ethnomusicological exploration of Irish music, it is not just appropriate but important to make explicit these interdisciplinary connections to history, politics, dance, film, and others.

What about this approach is possible to achieve in the context of a regular course on Irish traditional music in academies outside the admittedly progressive “one full-time programme per year” approach of my institute? Granted, 16 hours a week is out of the question for most institutes, considering that most students don’t pursue 16 hours a week in the sum total of their university education. However, something as simple as including interdisciplinary information in classroom discussions and asking essay questions in exams can help to build some of those critical analytical skills and add strength to their understanding of the music’s context. Each of us could come up with a dozen interdisciplinary questions in a heartbeat, but these could be a starting point for discussion or written work. Assessing their ideas here allows and encourages them to go not only beyond the notes and rhythms, but also beyond the borders of Ireland in some cases.

- What are the elements of an “international language” of music, and why doesn’t that concept work most of the time? Why might it work in Irish traditional music?
- How can a “folk music” (e.g., *sean-nós* singing) be considered a nation’s contribution to classical music? What do those terms mean to you?
- Why is it that the Celts are always the most celebrated of the early Irish, when they were actually comparatively late to arrive on the scene?
- Is there any one instrument (besides the harp) that symbolises for you a nation and its people? What would that be, and why?
- Does it matter, in playing Irish traditional music, whether you are a Catholic or a Protestant? Why or why not? What about whether you are an Irish citizen or not?
- If you could write a broadside ballad today, what would it be about? Create the first two stanzas.
- When Irish people play a polka created in Ireland, is it still a polka? What about a mazurka or a waltz?

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that this approach might be particularly useful to those who live and work outside of Ireland because there, unlike in Ireland itself, one has to assume a starting point of zero understanding on the part of our students. Although Ireland's population obviously comprises people of many heritages, the majority of those Irish-born citizens enrolled in Irish music courses in Ireland will have at least some knowledge of – for example – the provinces, counties, *cúpla focal*, and basic Irish history. And yet, how many Irish students are familiar enough with the major Irish and Irish-American poets, playwrights, and films – beyond the requirements of the Leaving Cert – to make that interdisciplinary leap of connection? We assume a great deal about their knowledge at our own risk.

Furthermore, although it is easy to assume that family legacies of musical instruction form the backbone of Irish music within Ireland, processes of traditional pedagogies (or lack thereof) are much more diverse; see, for example, the fascinating study of the role of the family in Irish music pedagogy by Jessica Cawley, 2013. Clubs, festivals, recordings, online resources, individual musicians, and general exposure all contribute to musical development, and the comparatively rarified air of ethnomusicology in Irish academia is fairly new in terms of direct musical instruction and degree acquisition in Irish traditional music.^{xvi} Why not build interdisciplinarity into our curricula from the beginning?

REFERENCES CITED

Cawley, Jessica. (2013) "Musical Development in Irish Traditional Music: an Exploration of Family Influences", *Ethnomusicology Ireland* 2/3: 95-111.

Gray, Ann Marie and Elizabeth Law. (2014) "The Politics of Defining 'Armed Conflict' in Northern Ireland". <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/elizabeth-law-ann-marie-gray/politics-of-defining-armed-conflict-in-northern-ireland/>. Accessed: 7 July 2014.

Kinealy, Christine. (1995) "Beyond Revisionism: reassessing the Great Irish Famine", *History Ireland* 4(4).

Lattuca, Lisa. (2001) *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching among College and University Faculty*. Vanderbilt University Press.

Rhoten, Diana, Veronica Mansilla, Marc Chun, and Julie Thompson Klein. (2000) "Interdisciplinary Education at Liberal Arts Institutions". <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/docs/natlproject/2006ssrcwhitepaper.pdf/> Accessed: 22 June 2014.

ⁱ For a textbook on Irish music, I recently began using my own (semi-interdisciplinary) *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (Routledge 2010) after being frustrated in my experiments with using other texts and articles. I wrote it because, as the American saying goes, "If you want something done right you have to do it yourself".

ⁱⁱ Several of my students witnessed this occurrence in the late 1990s.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am not always successful in convincing them to let go of the sheet music, especially if they are classically trained.

^{iv} “This man had three daughters; their mother was dead. They were the apples of his eye, and he was the apple of their eye. And they always looked after him as a daughter should look after a father. And one night he came home, feeling awful bad. And the daughters put their three heads together and said, ‘Daddy doesn’t feel well today. What are we going to do with him?’ So they decided the best thing to do, to make him a glass of punch, and put him to bed. So they got the biggest glass they could find in the house, and they filled it up to there with rum. A spoon of sugar, and a spoon of boiling water, and they topped it off with rum. And they gave it to him in the bed. And the following morning he was jumping on top of the stair. And the eldest daughter came up to him and said, ‘Did the rum do?’ That means, did the rum do the job. Did the rum do. And the second daughter, she came up and she said, ‘Did the rum do, Da?’ And the youngest girl she came up and said, ‘Did the rum do, Daddy?’ And he started tapping his feet, like that”. [Joe Heaney starts singing at this point.] This transcription is from a concert Heaney performed in Sydney, Australia in the late 1970s.

^v In other words, I am the first to point out the flaws inherent in learning to sing in Irish from a non-native speaker.

^{vi} An easy example of a region-specific song is something from Donegal, which would allow me to discuss the influence of Scottish music as a part of the migration patterns of Donegal workers who spend time in Scotland and bring home not just songs but also stylistic features in their singing.

^{vii} As a matter of full disclosure, I spent a considerable amount of time in the early 1980s studying directly from the Carna sean-nós singer Joe Heaney (Joe Éinniú) while he was in residence at the University of Washington in Seattle.

^{viii} This English translation by Virginia Blankenhorn appears on the website <http://www.joeheaney.org>:

*Were you at the rock?
Did you see my love?
Did you see the brightness, the fairness,
And the beauty of the woman?
Did you see the apple
That is loveliest and freshest of blossom?
Did you see my Valentine
And is she still being persecuted as they say?*

*I was at the rock
I saw your love
I saw the brightness, the fairness,
And the beauty of the woman
I saw the apple
That is loveliest and freshest of blossom
I saw your Valentine
And she still being persecuted as they say.*

^{ix} Irish-language songs for the class vary each summer, but might include “An Crúiscín Lán”, “Bean a’ Leanna”, “Siúil Arúin”, “Óró mo Bháidín”, “Níl ‘na Lá”, “Slán agus Beannacht le Buaireamh an Tsaoil”, “Éileanóir a Rún”, “Péigín agus Peadar”, “Tá Mé mo Shuí”, “Bean Pháidín”, “An Cailín Deas Donn”, “Críocha ‘n Oilean Úr”, “Róisín Dubh”, “Is Trua Nach Bhfuil Mé in Éirinn”, “An Maighdean Mhara”, “Éiníní”, “Brid Óg Ní Mhaile”, “Cailleach an Airgid”, “Dónal Óg”, and “An Raibh Tú ar an gCarraig”. The mix is obvious, from easy to challenging and from more than one region of Ireland.

^x For example, many Americans like to ignore the American Civil War, which dramatically changed the emotional and intellectual landscape of the States. Yet it continues to shape and distort American political and social interactions to this day.

^{xi} I would argue that there is no “perfect” text, film, poem, song, or anecdotal remembrance of the Famine. My choices tend toward items that will lead to fruitful discussion rather than agreement,

because I place a higher value on my students' ability to defend their ideas than their ability to replicate something from a lecture or text.

^{xii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTY0guPwKAw>

^{xiii} I took him out to dinner at a local Thai restaurant, which was one of the most difficult moments of my professional life simply because of the abundance of food all around us. The most pressing question my students had asked (privately, to me) was "What is his relationship to food today?" I had to ask him on behalf of my students, and his response was (of course) gracious and reasonable: that when he was young, he hadn't had many chances to have good food, so letting go of it for a time was not such a big deal (he was mainly sleepy all the time during the strike). It wasn't until much later that he enjoyed all kinds of food.

^{xiv} Note that plagiarism is impossible with this assignment.

^{xv} 1. "Cailleach an Airgid". 2. "Johnny Seoighe". 3. "Kilkelly, Ireland". 4. Óró, Sé do Bheatha 'Bhaile". 5. "Muldoon, the Solid Man". 6. "Bríd Óg Ní Mhaille". 7. "Paddy's Lamentation". 8. An Bhuinneáin Bhúí". 9. "There were Roses". 10. "Níl Sé ina Lá".

^{xvi} At the same time, presenting "Irish music" as exclusively dance tunes and songs leaves out entire bodies of music enjoyed by Irish people and Irish-descended people in the diaspora. They are worth discussing as well.

Author Biography

Sean Williams teaches ethnomusicology, Irish Studies, and Asian Studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. She received the Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Washington (1990), with an emphasis in the musics of Indonesia and Ireland. Her books include *The Sound of the Ancestral Ship: Highland Music of West Java* (Oxford, 2001), *The Ethnomusicologists' Cookbook* (Routledge, 2006), *Irish Traditional Music* (Routledge, 2010), and *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song-Man* (Oxford, 2011). She has had articles published in *The New Hibernia Review*, *Béalóideas*, *Asian Music*, *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, *Current Musicology*, *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, and several edited volumes. Every three years she teaches a year-long, interdisciplinary "program" in Irish Studies that culminates with a spring-term stay in Donegal, to teach her students how to put theory into practice.